THE 'BORN-AGAIN' OBA: PENTECOSTALISM AND TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCY IN YORUBALAND

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Abstract

This article examines the remarkable phenomenon of 'born-again' obas in Yorubaland both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. It argues that while Pentecostal doctrine does not distinguish between 'faith' and 'cultural' conversion, such a distinction might have become pragmatic for many of these obas in order to avert communal crises. Those who remained rigid without the support of higher political authorities came up against serious brick wall in their respective domains. This study shows that the conversion of an oba goes beyond a personal change of religious affiliation, but raises questions of power relations and cultural hegemony. The article also highlights the intersection between conversion, modernity and development. It demonstrates how 'physical development' gradually became a principal parameter used to assess the performance of traditional rulers in post-colonial Nigeria, and how a high rating in this regard could mitigate hostilities provoked by an oba's 'born-again' stance. At the heart of this entire discourse is the contestation of power through religious or 'development' idioms.

Introduction

On July 19, 2003, the fourteen-year rule of *Oba* Adara Aderiye, the *Olode* of Ode-Ekiti in Gbonyin Local Government Area of Ekiti State, Nigeria, suddenly came to an ignominious end. According to media reports, the *Oba* was beaten up by irate youths, stripped of his paraphernalia and later chased out of the town naked.[1] Shortly after this, traditional trees in strategic shrines in the town were cut, symbolizing his demise. The kingmakers then wrote the Ekiti State Government that the *Olode* had been deposed. Thereafter, the ruling house which had nominated him for the *oba*ship publicly disowned him. His offence was his refusal to participate in community rituals on account of his personal faith as a 'born-again' Christian.[2]

Similarly, in 2004, *Oba* Samuel Popoola Adelegan, the *Ogboni* of Ipole in Atakumosa East Local Government Area of Osun State was banished from his town after a twenty-two year rule. The refusal of the *Oba* to continue to appease the two major deities of the town (*Ogun* and *Owari*) following his spiritual "rebirth" infuriated his people. He was later reinstated after three

years in exile by the state government in 2007 amidst continuing protest from the womenfolk. According to eye-witness reports, as he was about to re-enter the palace, "he opened his Yoruba Bible and repeatedly read Psalm 24 at all the entrances …. He also led a prayer session that lasted about fifteen minutes".[3]

The issues involved in these two examples may not have been as straightforward as presented above. Several factors must have interacted to create these tensions. No doubt, these *Oba*s, at some point, became very unpopular in their respective towns. Perhaps, we should also ask questions about the quality of their rule, the amount of 'development' that the town witnessed during their tenure and their integrity as leaders. Meanwhile, the question of faith, interpreted here, not just as religious affiliation, but also as one of cultural hegemony and power relations remains at the heart of the crisis.

This paper is neither about the *Olode* of Ode nor the *Ogboni* of Ipole *per se*, but addresses the general experience of 'born-again' *oba*s in Yorubaland using several other cases to illustrate its major nuances. It sets out to contextualize and interrogate the phenomenon of 'born-again' Yoruba *oba*s in the second half of the twentieth century. How were they able to simultaneously manage these two contradictory identities? The very idea of a 'born-again' *oba* appears to be incongruous with reality. The 'fanaticism' and 'extremism' of Pentecostals as well as their unbridled denunciation of other religious persuasions stand in sharp contrast to the tolerance and mediatory position which the royal fathers are expected to exemplify.

At the heart of this discourse are two vital issues. The first is the local perception of conversion. Does the community understand the conversion of its *oba* in much the same way as the latter does? How personal is the conversion experience for the *oba*? Does Pentecostal doctrine make any distinction between 'faith conversion' and 'cultural conversion"? Is it possible for the *oba* to retain a private Christian conscience and simultaneously abide by the demands of local traditions? What actually changes in the identity of the converted *oba*? How potent is the spiritual alternative of protection and power to which the new faith introduces the *oba*? Does the *oba* convert alone or with his courtiers? The second issue here is the intersection between development and modernity. At what point did development as a goal enter the Yoruba modernization project? What did development mean in the Yoruba context both in the colonial and post-colonial periods? How do we historicize the Yoruba concept of progress and

development? How do these connect with Christianity? And how do all these concepts affect the political configuration of Yoruba communities?

In my attempt to find answers to these questions, I first create a backdrop by exploring the links between conversion, modernity and development, and also discuss briefly Nigerian Pentecostalism (its origins, development and contemporary forms). I then examine the reign of *Olubadan* I.B. Akinyele (1955-1964) as an example of an early Pentecostal in colonial Yorubaland who carried his beliefs into his office as *oba*. This is followed by a few post-colonial cases of 'born-again' *oba*s. This temporal comparison helps us appreciate the changes that have occurred not only in the general socio-political environment, but also within traditional religion and Pentecostal Christianity. This also illuminates how these changes have impinged on traditional institutions. The conclusion assesses the way in which the born-again *oba* attempted to resolve the incongruity between the two value systems.

CONVERSION, MODERNITY AND DEVELOPMENT

A major issue at the heart of Christianity is conversion from a previous religious ideology. This issue of conversion has been discussed extensively by leading sociologists/anthropologists. According to J.D.Y. Peel, conversion has to do with a change of identity.[4] It is a change of a person's religious identification. This presupposes that individuals could have more than one religious affiliation. At conversion, the new religion is domesticated as indigenous traditions are woven around it. Studies of religious conversion have also addressed not only the private convictions of the individual convert, but also the manner in which the public (wider society) perceive and define such conversion (especially in the case of prominent figures) and how it is related to other socio-political issues. Michelle Gilbert's study of the sudden death of a Ghanaian Christian millionaire is a case in point.[5]

Another aspect of conversion is the fact that it is not always a hundred percent, spontaneous experience. Some aspects of the old order are always retained, as the convert simultaneously juggle "multiple and inconsistent interpretations of behaviours and events" much to the consternation of missionaries and other church leaders who consider such as syncretic.[6] This also demonstrates that conversion is a process and not a once-and-for-all event. And sometimes, this process may not even have been completed by the time the convert dies.[7] It

involves a continuous negotiation and dialogue between the old order and the new religious ideology.

Moreover, empirical studies of specific conversions have shown that there are two sides to conversion experiences, both of which are very significant. The first is the internal or intrinsic aspect. This deals with personal faith and spirituality. This could also entail a form of spiritual empowerment. The second is the extrinsic aspect which deals with external considerations of power such as matters of economic dominance and strategy and other cultural benefits. While these two aspects resonate with the private/public dimensions of conversion mentioned above, they also underline the centrality of power in discourses of conversion. Emmanuel Akyeampong articulates this private/public dimension in his study of the conversion experience of 'Asantehene' Agyeman Prempeh I.[8] Prempeh's conversion was as much an intense spiritual experience as it was a socio-political strategy for survival. John Peel's study of the nineteenth-century conversion of Kabaka Mutesa of Buganda also reveals an interplay of economic pragmatism and spiritual considerations.[9]

Closely related to this is the fact that conversion means different things to people at different times. For instance, to early converts in the Gold Coast, Christianity held the hope of socio-economic advancement through the acquisition of Western education and literacy skills. It was also a spiritual alternative which involved giving up a major source of protection by ancestors and deities and gaining biblical protection.[10] Peel's study of conversion to Islam and later Christianity among the Ijebu-Yoruba shows that power sought from the new religion was used to *supplement* rather than *replace* traditional sources.[11] However, as Western education became more readily and widely available in various African communities through secular, non-Christian means, the explanation for latter conversions needed to be sought elsewhere. This brings us to the connection between conversion and modernity.

Modernity means different things in different contexts. Within the colonial context, modernity has been described as a dangerous concept. Akyeampong argues that the colonizer "contrived to fracture modernity and present certain strands as a 'gift' to the colonized" who, in turn, was more concerned with appropriating its empowering aspects without provoking the ire of the latter.[12] Elsewhere, the empowering aspects of modernity embraced by colonized peoples have been characterized as 'progress' expressed as community-based development.[13] While progress among the Yoruba was understood locally as *ilosiwaju* (moving forward), development

was interpreted as *idagbasoke* (growing up). However, it must be noted that development has multiple meanings and implication depending on the context.[14]

During the colonial period, development was understood as *olaju* (enlightenment) by the Yoruba who saw education as a means of accessing the fruits of modernity through its empowering nature.[15] The connection between modernity and Christian conversion could thus be seen in the fact that the early local champions of this 'progress' or 'modernity' were Christians who had been converted and had acquired Western education. Christian convictions however, did not necessarily debar this elite from appropriating useful and empowering aspects of traditional life.

In the post-colonial context, especially with the failure of new African states as from the 1980s to provide basic amenities and meet the needs of the populace, the physical and economic dimensions of development became emphasized. Communities started to yearn for infrastructural development, provision of basic amenities, establishment of small-scale industries, and provision of employment opportunities for their youth. While it was clear to all that what was needed was 'participatory' development, which emphasized self-help, it was nonetheless expected that the *oba*s would play a crucial role in mobilizing the 'sons' and 'daughters' of their communities to actualize this through their town associations. Moreover, the *oba* was also expected to use his contacts to attract to his community the necessary help or largesse from relevant State and Federal authorities.

THE NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

Scholars have identified three overlapping phases in the history and development of the Nigerian Pentecostal movement.[16] The most notable of such scholars is Matthews Ojo whose work, the *End-Time Army*, remains the latest and most detailed account of Nigerian Pentecostalism.[17] However, Ojo prefers the term 'charismatic' to 'Pentecostal' and takes great pains to distinguish between the two. While this distinction addresses salient academic issues, it overlooks the fact that in practice, Nigerian Christians hardly draw a line between 'charismatics' and 'Pentecostals' except perhaps in the case of Catholic 'Charismatics'. Nevertheless, Ojo's observations and conclusions about the conduct and attributes of 'charismatics' are equally true of 'Pentecostals' too.

The first phase in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism could be dated from the 1930s (when the movement began) to the late 1960s.The antecedents of Nigerian Pentecostalism are unmistakably indigenous though it owed much of its later growth to external stimuli from the global Pentecostal movement. This indigenous origin is linked to the *Aladura* movement, which in the second decade of the twentieth century had no direct link with worldwide Pentecostalism ignited by the 1906 Azusa revival.[18] J.D.Y. Peel has written on the Western Nigerian *Aladura* movement and so its details need not bother us here, but a brief summary might be given.[19] The *Aladura* was a prayer-marked movement led by individual prophets who claimed to have seen heavenly visions and received the divine call. Their activities included fervent prayers, spirit possession and public evangelism. They were organized first as small groups such as the 1918 Ijebu-Ode prayer movement which sought a spiritual solution to the influenza epidemic.[20] There were also *Aladura* churches such as the Cherubim and Seraphim Church established in 1925, the Church of the Lord founded in 1929 and the Celestial Church of Christ established much later in 1947.[21] Meanwhile there were also parallel 'pentecostal' manifestations elsewhere in Nigeria such as the revival led by Garrick Sokari Braide in the Niger Delta in the 1910s.[22] Later *Aladura* revivals included the meetings led by Joseph Ayo Babalola in Ilesha in the 1930s.[23]

This local *Aladura* movement eventually came in contact with external Pentecostal influences represented by the American Faith Tabernacle in 1920, and the British Apostolic Church in 1931.[24] The rise of the Christ Apostolic Church in the early 1930s which incorporated diverse Pentecostal manifestations such as intense prayers, fasting, divine healing, glossolalia, and biblical inerrancy thus marked the establishment of Nigerian Pentecostalism. As more indigenous Pentecostal bodies sprang up, foreign Pentecostal ministries also found their way into the country. These included the Assemblies of God (1940), the Full Gospel Apostolic Church (1949), and the Foursquare Gospel Church (1955). In the 1960s several American evangelists such as Billy Graham and T.L. Osborn also came to conduct mass meetings in Nigeria.[25]

The second phase, which spanned the 1970s and the 1980s, saw the rise of interdenominational Campus Fellowships where university students were actively mobilized to champion the Pentecostal message of holiness, biblical inerrancy and Holy Spirit Baptism. This, according to Ojo marked the advent of what he calls the 'charismatic' movement, which he characterized as being predominantly a 'religion of the youth'.[26] The leaders of this second phase were university graduates who initially operated within para-church fellowships until the

movement later became routinized. A classic example of such groups is the Deeper Life Christian Ministry founded by W.F. Kumuyi, which later metamorphosed into the Deeper Life Bible Church.[27]

The third phase is the contemporary period, which could be dated from the early 1990s till date. This period has witnessed an explosion in the Pentecostal movement. Some of the new churches established include the Redeemed Evangelical Mission, Winners' Chapel, Word of Life Bible Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Christ Embassy and others that have been very aggressive in the Nigerian Pentecostal terrain. The Pentecostal movement also became more visible and vocal due to its appropriation of media technology for proselytization. The leaders of this new wave are young upwardly mobile professionals, whose evangelistic efforts have been enhanced by the appropriation of modern marketplace techniques. Moreover, the classical 'holiness doctrine is gradually being jettisoned in favour of the 'faith gospel' of prosperity and healing.[28] While newer churches are constantly springing up, older churches (such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God) are also expanding and incorporating aspects of the neo-Pentecostal movement. The oppressive military regimes of the 1990s under General I.B. Babangida (1985-1993) and General S. Abacha (1993-1998), coupled with an impoverished economy and breakdown of State amenities made the promise of empowerment, healing and prosperity made by the Pentecostal churches particularly appealing to many Nigerians who flocked to them.

Moreover, the explosion witnessed by the Pentecostal movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century was not peculiar to Nigeria. In fact, it is an ongoing global phenomenon, particularly noticeable in North America, Latin America, Asia, and other parts of Africa. Again, what makes the Pentecostal message to be so appealing to the local population is that it satisfies the quest in them for survival and fulfillment in a hostile world. At the level of the individual, the Pentecostal appeal translates to fulfilling personal spiritual experiences. This spiritual satisfaction motivates and inspires men and women who in turn give the movement its unusual vitality. In Nigeria, members of the Pentecostal movement are called 'born-again'. This term is derived from the Bible (John 3:7) and it describes the salvation experience in which the believer is said to have had a 'new birth' that marks his redemption from sin and his spiritual transformation. However, this term became popularized only in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The standard of conduct expected from 'born-again' Christians is very high. Among

other things, they are to live holy and righteous lives, to be above reproach in their businesses, to work hard, and be shinning examples to others around them. They are to break away from their past lives, shunning idolatry and all traditional rituals and embrace a new life in Christ. They are also to aggressively evangelize the world, 'making disciples of all nations', starting from their immediate communities.

In all these, the born-again Christian is not to compromise his faith with the world by lowering his Christian standards. At first, these 'born-again' were drawn from the lower classes but with the popularization of Pentecostalism in the closing decades of the twentieth century, many professionals, middle class groups and some of the upper ruling class became 'converted' too. In the case of the latter, quite a number of them chose to remain secret disciples like the biblical 'Nicodemus' and decided not to publicize their conversion.[29] Conversions to Pentecostalism were not always from traditional religion and Islam, but also from mainline Christianity. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, members of the Pentecostal community had blacklisted the *Aladura* pioneers due to their accommodation of certain traditional religious practices. Those *Aladura* Churches were now derisively labeled as 'white-garment' Churches, and their members needed to become 'born-again' and join other Pentecostal Churches for them to be accepted as part of the Nigerian Pentecostal community. Thus by the end of the century the Pentecostal message itself had witnessed a 'rebirth' (i.e. redefinition) and had cut across all social categories, namely, the rich and poor, illiterate and educated, artisans, petty traders and professionals, the ruling elite and the masses, and of course, our main subjects here, the traditional rulers.

YORUBA *OBAS* AND PENTECOSTALISM

Traditional Approach to Religion: The Yoruba Ideal

Traditionally, Yoruba rulers were expected to be broad-minded and accommodate all shades of opinions and beliefs in their domain as long as these were not inimical to the progress and development of the community. Even where a ruler was a devotee of a particular cult, he was expected to still tolerate other religious groups. In fact, he was expected to actively participate in the worship of those divinities considered to be crucial to the well being of the community i.e. the tutelary gods and goddesses. Moreover, in ancient Yoruba towns and villages

the rulers had to be initiated, and were actively involved in the royal cult and other rituals associated with the throne and the office of the ruler. The office of the traditional ruler was therefore a highly ritualized one. In pre-colonial times, Yoruba kings were not just devotees of particular cults, but in their own rights were sometimes even portrayed as 'gods'. Their appellation then was '*Alase, Ekeji Orisa*' (Possessor of *ase* [sacred authority], second only to the gods).[30]

In the words of Bolaji Idowu: "when the cult becomes of town-wide significance, the head of the town assumes the position of *Pontifex Maximus*. A paramount Yoruba clan-head is virtually a priest-king because he is regarded as "divine in consequence of his scepter, which is derived from the divinity to whom he is viceregent".[31] This was particularly true of rulers of large kingdoms like Oyo and Ile-Ife. Such kings actively sought to maintain their ritual influence and spiritual authority, and of all the Yoruba states, Ile-Ife was the spiritual head, presenting an array of divinities and cults while its ruler, the *Ooni* was seen as a demi-god possessing great spiritual powers, and was patronized far and wide by other rulers seeking power and protection.

The advent of colonialism dealt a serious blow to the mystique and aura associated with the divine authority of *oba*s. The inability of the *oba*s to ward off colonial conquests and maintain their own sovereignty, clearly attest to this. Moreover, even the most ritualized kingship became subordinated to colonial administrators, who were 'common men and strangers' backed by the full weight of British power and authority. The introduction of Christianity also undermined the hold of traditional religion in Yoruba communities. Pentecostalism was particularly non-compromising in its denunciation of traditional religious practices, and community rituals, making it sacrilegious for any born-again believer to still promote or participate in such activities under any guise whatsoever. However, despite this seeming paradox certain traditional rulers became born-again.

Olubadan I. B. Akinyele 1955-1964: A Colonial Example

Isaac Babalola Akinyele was a prominent member of the educated elite in Ibadan before he joined the traditional chieftaincy hierarchy. He had a long career in the Native Authority from 1903-1920 first as Clerk, then Secretary to the Ibadan Council and later as its Treasurer. He was a member of Saint Peters Anglican Church Aremo, Ibadan, before he became exposed to

the doctrines of the Faith Tabernacle in 1925. It was probably at this time that he had the salvation experience equivalent to being 'born-again' of later years. He so much believed in the Faith Tabernacle doctrines of holiness, prayers and emphasis on the supernatural that he was also preaching them to the local farmers in his farm at Akinke Village, fifteen miles to the South east of Ibadan.[32] When the Faith Tabernacle was to give way to the Christ Apostolic Church, the wave of revival activities took place under the patronage of I.B. Akinyele in the 1930s. He was thus one of the early leaders of the Christ Apostolic Church. This revival penetrated Ibadan farms especially Akinyele's own farms at Akinyele market, Akinke and Igbo Elerin. He nurtured the Christ Apostolic Church in these areas by visiting them regularly from the city as a Pastor when his duties as a chief in Ibadan permitted.[33] Although Akinyele's conversion predated his chieftaincy career, those were times when the Pentecostal movement was still unfolding and had not yet become popular. Therefore he could not be said to have taken up Pentecostalism for any extrinsic reason. For him, the intrinsic aspect of conversion was paramount and he made no secret of his religious affiliation as the rest of this account shows.

He got his first chieftaincy title in 1936 as *Lagunna Balogun*.[34] This was a junior title in the Ibadan chieftaincy hierarchy and from there he gradually climbed to the top through automatic promotions. As a chief, I.B. Akinyele was instrumental to the conversion of a few other members of the ruling elite, and he had a reputation of being an uncompromising Pentecostal.[35] This attribute could be illustrated by the 1953 case when he was to be made the *Balogun* of Ibadan. The *Balogun* title was a war title, and in pre-colonial times, the *Balogun* was the most senior warlord who led many of the Ibadan military campaigns. Naturally, many rituals were associated with the office and the pre-colonial *Balogun*s in Ibadan were characterized by their use of *Oogun* (charms or native medicine). *Balogun* Ajayi Ogboriefon (1871-1879), for instance, accumulated so much charms that a line in his *oriki* (praise poem) describes him as *'A b'oogun gb'oogun pon'* (the one with overlapping charms). Although there were no more wars in the twentieth century, the *Balogun* title, of all Ibadan chieftaincies, remained the most ritualized. The *Balogun* was expected to keep the Ibadan war ensign; *Opa Balogun* (in form of a staff) which had to be 'appeased' periodically with certain prescribed sacrifices and other rituals.[36]

Therefore when I.B. Akinyele was to be made *Balogun*, not only did he kick against the installation rituals, he also refused to accept custody of the *Opa Balogun*. This raised a lot of

dust because the war ensign was the symbol of the office. Without it, the *Balogun* had no authority. In fact, it was unheard of in Ibadan that a prospective *Balogun* would despise the war ensign. Eventually, the town allowed Akinyele to make a silver substitute, which was presented to him during his installation. The new staff was 'powerless' in the eyes of the people and this further de-mystified the office of the *Balogun*, and indeed the other traditional chieftaincies because the *Balogun* title was next in line to the *Olubadan*, the head chief.

It was thus not easy for Akinyele to ascend to the *Olubadan*ship in 1955 when it was his turn to do so. A serious opposition was mounted against him by a few of the other chiefs in alliance with some local politicians. The issue became heavily politicized. Before this time Akinyele had been a supporter of the regional party, the Action Group, whereas the Ibadan Council was controlled by the N.C.N.C. (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons), a rival party. The plan of Akinyele's 'enemies' was to install another chief, Bello Akinyo as *Olubadan* instead of him. As a matter of fact, Adegoke Adelabu, Chairman of the Ibadan Council and an N.C.N.C. stalwart, actually attempted this on February 12, 1955 but was overruled by the British Resident who announced that government recognition of Akinyele was "final, irrevocable and in accordance with the law [and that] any other installation is bogus and anybody taking part in it exposes himself to the risk of prosecution".[37] On February 18, Akinyele was duly installed as the *Olubadan* and the opposing chiefs were later reconciled to him.

This did not end Akinyele's travails. He faced very fierce criticisms and suffered a lot of ridicule from N.C.N.C. politicians who used the press to mock his religious activities. *The Southern Nigeria Defender*, a mouthpiece of the N.C.N.C. was relentless in pouring invectives on the *Olubadan*.[38] His political detractors felt that if he insisted on mixing with all categories of people under the guise of evangelizing them, and at the expense of his palace duties, then they too had a right to withhold their respect from him. So many people could not understand why *Olubadan* Akinyele would still insist on going to preach at open-air meetings despite his exalted status as the ruler of Ibadan, the capital of the Western Regional government and the most populous indigenous city in West Africa.

Until his death in 1964, *Olubadan* Akinyele held on to the doctrines of the Christ Apostolic Church. One of such was the belief in divine healing. Hence the Church was locally referred to as '*Ijo Olomi-tutu* [39] (the cold water Church) while the entire C.A.C. phenomenon was called '*esin ma-loogun'* (the religion that is against the use of medicine).[40] He popularized

the Church in Ibadan. He was known as a man of prayers, and he was not ashamed to evangelize and reach out to people of the lower classes from his position as traditional ruler. This had a dual impact. While it endeared him to the lower classes and presented him as a man of the people, it irritated the traditionalists and his political opponents. More than anything, Akinyele was known in his time for successfully resisting the traditional rituals attached to the throne of the *Olubadan*.[41]

While on the one hand it could be said that Akinyele stripped the office of the *Olubadan* of its rituals thus de-mystifying it, on the other hand he brought a different type of prestige into the office. I.B. Akinyele was the first educated man that ascended the throne of the *Olubadan*. Previous *Olubadan*s had been stark illiterates. Akinyele brought into the office his long years of experience first as staff of the Native Authority, then as Councilor in the Ibadan council, and of course, nineteen years of moving up the chieftaincy ladder. His ascension was a triumph for the educated elite in Ibadan who had long wished that one of them would be *Olubadan*, for greater efficiency in administration and of course, for prestige. This was because it had become a reproach to Ibadan that as urbanized as the city was, its rulers were still not literate up to the mid 1950s.

As *Olubadan*, Akinyele was honoured by the colonial government as a Knight of the British Empire (K.B.E.). He was also appointed as a Minister without portfolio in the Western Region Government controlled by the Action Group.[42] After Akinyele, Ibadan has had several other educated *Olubadan*s, though none has been a Pentecostal. Of these all, and in fact, throughout the twentieth century, Akinyele had the most distinguished (though turbulent) career as *Olubadan*. He could withstand local opposition because of the support of the Regional government which he enjoyed. More significantly, the development experienced by Ibadan and the amenities provided by the Action Group government were locally attributed to Akinyele's contacts even though Ibadan was the seat of the regional government.

Post-Colonial Obas and Pentecostalism

After the colonial period, the stakes in community politics were raised significantly. By the 1980s, there was considerable agitation for *oba*s that could attract 'development' to their respective domains. Meanwhile, the Pentecostal movement by the same period had also become increasingly intolerant of other Christian groups, namely, mainline Christianity and the *Aladura*.

By the 1990s, the 'Islamist' policies of the military regimes of Generals Babangida (1985-1993) and Abacha (1993-1998) had provoked instant opposition from Pentecostal circles leading to the gradual politicization of the Pentecostal identity in Nigeria.[43] Traditional religion also stood no chance with this rigid stance of Pentecostals. Given this situation, it is therefore remarkable that some 'born-again' Christians became traditional rulers while some traditional rulers also became 'born-again'. Pentecostalism, if carried to its logical conclusion and practiced in its strictest sense was prone to destabilize the traditional socio-political order and generate great crisis. So, what attracted Yoruba *oba*s to the Pentecostal message or, why would a 'born-again' ascend the highly ritualized Yoruba throne?

The answers to the above questions are largely to be found in the personal appeal that the Pentecostal message had for the *oba*s first and foremost as individuals. Many of the 'born-again' rulers interviewed for this study had been converted before they ascended the throne. For those who became converted as rulers, it appears personal considerations (the search for solutions to personal problems and the quest for spiritual fulfillment) drew them to Pentecostalism and not the prospect of any socio-political advantages they might enjoy as chiefs. *Oba* Matthew Oyekale, the *Ola-Aresa* of Masifa Ile (a small town of Oyo extraction but now in Osun State of Nigeria) had been a practicing Pentecostal for about six years before he ascended the throne in 1977.[44] More dramatic was the case of *Oba* Julius Fatanmi, the *Olura* of Ira (a small Ijesha town) who was already a Pentecostal Pastor before he became a traditional ruler.[45] On the other hand, *Oba* Olatunde Falabi, the *Akire* of Ikire was a Christian of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church before he became the *Oba* and later became born-again after about a decade on the throne.[46]

For these rulers and others with similar convictions, saying 'no' to traditional religious practices was a very tough issue for them and this generated considerable furore in their domains. The amount of heat generated depended on the approach of the ruler to the issue on the one hand, and the religious inclinations of the populace themselves on the other hand.

Matthew Oyekale ascended the Masifa throne at the age of twenty-six as an undergraduate law student of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). He later completed his studies and was called to the Nigerian Bar in 1980. Before he ascended the throne, he had earlier rejected the offer for about three years, because he was a born-again Christian and did not want to 'compromise his faith'. The chiefs and elders assured him that they would allow him to carry on with his religion. All they wanted was an educated candidate

for the throne. However, immediately Matthew became the *Oba*, the people came with all sorts of demands, which went against his faith. He was expected to participate actively in *Egungun* festivals and in the annual festival of *Orisha Olufon*, the most prominent local deity. Although majority of the population of the small town were Christians, mainly of Baptist extraction, the rest were Muslims and adherents of traditional religion. However, the traditionalists were powerful enough to hold the ruler to ransom. A lot of pressure was put upon him so he could conform to their practices. These oppositions ranged from palace boycotts by the chiefs, to civil disturbances. In his early days on the throne, he was denied all assistance and care that ought to have been given him as a young *oba* by his subjects. But he managed to survive all the opposition and hostility. His resilience for about twenty-five years has earned for him the much-needed acceptance. He is now known and respected as a Pentecostal king who would not bow to, or participate in traditional religious practices. The people still engage in their traditional religious activities but they have stopped insisting on the *Oba*'s direct participation.[47]

There is also the case of *Oba* James Ashaolu Adekeye the *Onimoji* of Imoji, a small community in Oke-Ero Local Government of Kwara State. James Adekeye, a retired civil servant from Kwara State was 'born-again' and an 'Elder' in his Pentecostal Church before he was offered the throne. Twice he declined the offer because he did not want to go into 'unchristian practices' and thus 'compromise his faith'. The offer came again the third time. By this time James was already fifty-eight years old. He then gave certain conditions to the people, namely that after becoming their ruler, they would not put pressure on him to participate in their traditional religious practices and *Oba*ship rituals, and that he would be allowed to practise his religion. Lawyers were called in to draft an agreement, which representatives of different sections of the community signed on behalf of the entire populace. It was only after this formal agreement had been signed that he agreed to be the *Oba*. Although Imoji was a predominantly Christian community, it was not without its traditional religious elements. However, these could not create any crisis because of the agreement, which had been signed.[48]

Olatunde Falabi, the *Akire* of Ikire, was a pharmacist before he ascended the throne in his mid-fifties in 1990, and he got born-again after almost a decade on the throne. Consequently, he gradually and tactfully stopped participating in traditional religious practices and other kingship rituals. However, because Ikire is a predominantly Muslim community, he could not turn his back on the Muslims. To maintain their goodwill, he still associates with them and today there

are joint Muslim and Christian prayer sessions for the peace of the town.[49] This alliance with the Muslims effectively suppressed whatever hostility might have erupted from traditional religious adherents on account of the withdrawal of royal patronage. This has ensured peace to a certain extent, but the question is how far the Oba would be able to maintain this accord with the Muslims without jeopardizing his Pentecostal ideals.

From the different cases cited above, certain issues come up. First, it appears the general desire in some of the communities for an educated king, placed the Pentecostal candidates in an advantageous position from which they negotiated with their people, and were able to flout some traditional religious requirements. Many communities had high expectations of "physical development" (defined as provision of basic amenities and infrastructure), which, they believed, only an educated incumbent could attract from the relevant State or Federal authorities. Thus in the absence of equally educated 'traditionalists' (or eligible Muslim candidates from the particular cases analyzed here), the Pentecostal candidates were enthroned.

This brings us to the legal element introduced in the case of the *Onimoji*. This seems to be a novelty in traditional politics and could well be said to be an extension of the *Onimoji*'s personal diplomatic skills. This contractual delineation of religious space in the community served to reduce tension, although it shows that while the ruler was not ready to compromise his own faith, the people were quite prepared to accommodate his demands. This buttresses the point made above on what a community stands to benefit from having an educated ruler, whether 'born-again' or not. These benefits are however not without cultural costs. Pentecostal rulers overtly or covertly have been promoting the erosion of traditional religious practices that negate their own faith, and are also attempting to evangelize the people once their initial hostility has been overcome. Such rulers even speak of additional benefits that accrue to their communities, which are accounted primarily in spiritual terms i.e. 'emancipation from the forces of evil' and of "phenomenal blessings".[50]

A pertinent question at this juncture is how to account for the difference in the cases described above that were ably managed by the *oba*s concerned and the two earlier examples of the *Olode* of Ode-Ekiti and the *Ogboni* of Ipole, which erupted in crisis. First, there is the issue of variation in the local power configuration. In a situation where an incumbent relentlessly espouses a contrary religious ideology without any real or perceived support from higher (State or Federal) political authorities, it could be difficult to avert a crisis situation. Where the rival

traditional authorities are the ones with such political contacts, the 'born-again' *oba* has little hope of survival. Secondly, the quality of his rule, in terms of the amount of 'development' and modernization he has been able to attract to his domain, if high, could mitigate the opposition, which his 'unpopular' conversion may attract. Thirdly, there is the support or bulwark offered by prominent 'sons and daughters of the soil' who wield considerable influence in local politics.

Today, the born-again rulers in Yorubaland are not many, and so one of their survival strategies is to network and interact with one another. In Osun State, for example, they actually established a formal association called Association of Born-Again Christian *Oba*s (AOBACO). The objectives of this Association are two-fold. One is to encourage and strengthen one another while the other is to reach out to their fellow *Oba*s and evangelize them.

All the examples given in this segment relate to rulers of small, rural communities and so the question is what about the paramount *Obas*, particularly those in the urban centers. A few of these are also born-again, but probably due to the complexities of their communities and the numerous stakeholders they need to tackle locally, they have not been so vocal with their religious beliefs. It thus appears that it is quite possible for such an *oba* to maintain a private Christian conscience while at the same time participating directly or by proxy in vital rituals considered necessary by the community for its wellbeing. Two examples of this would suffice. The late *Olufi* of Gbongan, *Oba* (Dr.) Solomon Oyewole Babayemi, Akinrinola I (1989-1997) was before his accession a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. His past research into various aspects of Yoruba culture and religion such as the *egungun* cult and *Ifa* oracle made him, as *oba*, more tolerant of traditional religious practices without necessarily jeopardizing his personal Christian conscience.[51] In fact, the personal challenge to Babayemi appears not to be the demands of traditional religion, but the depth of his own research into Yoruba culture and religion. When confronted by his Christian friends about his tolerance for Yoruba religion, he was said to have assured them that "he will never sacrifice his faith in God on the altar of his means of livelihood (career)".[52] Significantly, his reign was devoid of any major crisis. Despite his credentials as a past leader of the Christian Union in his university days at Ife (1963-1966), he demonstrated unusual insight and respect for Yoruba traditional culture and religion.[53]

A second example is that of the *Ooni* of Ife, *Oba* Okunade Sijuade, Olubuse II. On November 3, 2001, the Ooni made a public declaration at the Glory Tabernacle (a large

Pentecostal Church in Ibadan) during a special programme that he was relinquishing his title of "*Oluaye*" (possessor of the universe) in complete deference to the Almighty God, who he considered to be the *de facto* "*Oluaye*".[54] The traditional title of "*oluaye*" was not a presumptuous appropriation by the *Ooni* but reflected ancient belief in the divinity of the ruler. Therefore, this act of 'deference' to God was interpreted in local Pentecostal circles as marking the conversion of the *Ooni*, who traditionally is believed to personify Yoruba religion. However, since that incident, the *Ooni* has not failed to carry out his traditional ritual obligations while at the same time faithfully attending Christian gatherings. He appears to have cultivated a private Christian conscience that does not interfere with the discharge of his official duties as custodian of Yoruba tradition.

CONCLUSION

From the several cases cited in this article, it appears there are two categories of 'born-again' *oba*s: those with private Christian consciences and public tolerance for other faiths, and those who openly publicize their conversion and exhibit zero tolerance for the demands of other faiths. *Oba*s in the latter category generally experience more turbulence than those in the former. The *oba*s that publicize their religious affiliation are not necessarily apolitical. They utilize several levers: the people's desire for an educated *Oba*, which make them grant certain concessions; and, support from the 'regional government' or the party in power (as was the case of Akinyele). However, the rulers had a hard time 'christianizing' traditional institutions. But it appears that in certain places like Ibadan under Akinyele, the traditional system was able to survive bereft of some of its 'unchristian' aspects without altering its basic identity.

There is also the issue of the reaction of the community. It should be noted that many of these communities have heterogeneous population. Hostility to the ruler comes from traditionalists, political opponents, and others who have certain scores to settle with him. Sometimes sympathy for the ruler might not even be forthcoming from mainline Christians within his domain who might consider him as being fanatical and extreme. However, other Pentecostal groups usually rally round the embattled ruler to encourage, support and pray with him during his period of 'persecution'. The most important support comes from either educated elite groups within or outside the community or from 'government circles'. But it appears that generally, traditional religious practices are becoming eroded as more people turn to either Islam

or Christianity. Many of the rituals associated with the *Oba*ship institution are being jettisoned. For example, in 1997 at a Conference of Ijebu *Oba*s, it was resolved that burial of *Oba*s in Ijebuland would henceforth be "in accordance with the religious faith of the *Oba*, rather than age-old tradition in which so much secrecy shrouded royal internment".[55]

Moreover, the case of Imoji shows that subjects' reaction to born-again rulers' refusal to comply with certain traditional demands needs not always be hostile. The contractual manner in which the case was handled and the ensuing respect for the agreement by the people demonstrate their willingness to accommodate their ruler. It was also an indicator that the population has an overwhelming Christian majority. This fact notwithstanding, it is likely that the relative peace in Imoji will continue only as long as the ruler maintains his integrity and discharges his duties effectively and attracts the much desired 'development' to his domain. Any slackness on his part may attract unrest within the community.

This brings us to the role of the educated elite as power brokers in their local communities. The failure of the state system evident in its inability to provide basic facilities has made grassroots communities to resort to self-help schemes. Educated sons and daughters located within their communities and in larger urban cities form development associations to champion the transformation of their homelands. Their success in this regard has earned for them a voice in their communal politics. Thus when it comes to the choice of *Oba* or support for an embattled incumbent, their endorsement is equally as important as (if not more than) that of the traditional kingmakers. These elite associations are gradually becoming institutionalized within their respective communities.

How do we then characterize the born-again rulers? Are they insensitive to the yearnings of their subjects or are they victims of a clash of cultures? Pentecostalism, from what we have seen so far has spawn a culture of its own. At the same time, traditional religion is gradually losing its hold on the people. While at the level of the average individual the contradictions and identity crisis of religious conversion could be privately handled, it is not so at the level of the born-again rulers. Their religious convictions become matters of public debate and consequently generate considerable furore. The born-again chiefs are thus products of the Pentecostal culture that has come to stay and is thriving not only in Yorubaland but also in other parts of the globe.

Finally, there is also the need for the born-again rulers not just to focus on deconstructing traditional structures that are unacceptable to them, but also to offer society a viable alternative. The vital question is: What set of values are they propagating through their own lives and the quality of their administration? The life of I.B. Akinyele is a case in point. Akinyele challenged the unchristian practices of his times and left behind an enviable record of administrative distinction and personal integrity. Born-again rulers ought to borrow from this so that the sour taste that is left in the subjects' mouths because of the dismantling of certain aspects of the traditional structure could be mitigated by the high quality of their reign and by the fruits of their industry. Perhaps, a more pragmatic option is that adopted by those *oba*s that maintain a private Christian conscience and demonstrate some degree of tolerance for traditional religious practices deemed necessary for the stability of the community. Pentecostal leaders may call this "compromise" or "syncretism", but if conversion is understood as a process, then it is clear that the complete break from the past recommended by Pentecostal doctrine upon conversion is not always promptly accomplished, especially in the case of Yoruba *oba*s.

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